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"Quality of Life ? a priority for Europe"
Speech by Romano Prodi, President of the European
Commission to the Third Annual Assembly of Consumer
Associations, Brussels 23 November 2000

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to open this third Annual Assembly of Consumer
Organisations today and to welcome you to our headquarters in
Brussels.

These annual gatherings provide a valuable opportunity for fruitful
contacts between your organisations. Equally important, they enable the
Commission and other EU institutions to build an even more productive
dialogue with you.

This dialogue is essential in promoting consumer interests. We in the
Commission attach great importance to it, because consumer policy is
one of our top priorities. So we have willingly put financial and human
resources into organising this Assembly.

I want to extend a particularly warm welcome to delegates from the
"candidate" countries. I realise that you are making a great effort to
introduce a culture of consumer protection in your countries. It is vital to
give your consumers a powerful voice by creating effective consumer
representation bodies.

It will be largely *your* task to ensure that your fellow-citizens become
informed and educated consumers.

The Commission is helping you prepare for this task by providing training
and special seminars such as the one held yesterday. You can also
expect some financial support under the Phare programme to better
enable you to carry out your tasks in an independent manner.

In the enlarged EU, with all its rich diversity of cultures, it will be more
important than ever to take account of consumers' attitudes and to defend
their interests.

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Quality of life is a political priority

If there is one message I want you all to take home from this Assembly it is this: **the European Union exists for the benefit of its citizens, and it is they who must shape Europe's future.**

But the idea of Europe and of being a citizen of Europe will always seem vague and irrelevant to the general public unless Europe makes a practical difference to people's everyday lives. What we need is continent-wide action to improve the quality of our daily life.

Indeed, the Amsterdam Treaty commits the EU to a **high level of consumer protection** and to integrating consumer policy into other common policies and activities.

So my Commission has made it a top priority to improve the quality of life for Europe's citizens. We are determined to deliver practical and effective action on issues of real concern to consumers.

Issues such as the environment, energy, health, food safety, product safety, e-commerce, transport, living and working conditions, security and justice...

Things are already moving in the right direction. Today's policymakers generally accept that **creating the internal market must go hand in hand with protecting consumers.** Our new five-year strategy for the internal market explicitly states that improving the quality of life of European citizens is as important as enhancing economic competitiveness.

Let me give you just one or two examples of progress in specific sectors.

The Commission has introduced a new policy on **air passengers' rights.** We want basic, legally enforceable guarantees to be included in the purchase of the ticket, and we will be proposing legislation to this effect. Similarly, our new **telecommunications** proposals include provisions to enhance users' rights.

The Commission is also determined to make sure that consumers can have full confidence when using "**e-commerce**" and that their rights are protected. Increasingly, people are buying goods and services on the Internet. We want European citizens to reap the full benefits of this exciting new development. But this means ensuring that electronic transactions are profitable and safe for both industry and consumers.

I am concerned at the current state of e-commerce in Europe. Did you know that for every 100 dollars spent on US internet web sites, at least 29 comes from EU consumers and that US retailers already have a 20% share in e-commerce in Western Europe?

This shows that European business and European consumers are missing valuable opportunities. Hence the Commission's e-Europe initiative, which covers all aspects of e-commerce from encryption to